Take the children away from the Olympic movement

by Kirsten Sparre

He has made his name as one of the world’s most persistent anti-doping fighters, but Italian Sandro Donati is also an astute observer of structural problems in sport. At Play the Game 2007, he proposed a new structure for youth sport that will separate children and youngsters from the failed practices of the Olympic sports movement that value only records.

Donati criticised international sports federations for being businesses who are mainly interested in children and preadolescents as talent pools and therefore has created a sports system that encourages many children into specialising in a particular sport at far too young an age.

It is a system in crisis, Donati said, worrying that the diffusion of doping in that system will become such a well-established practice that it is handed down to future generations.

“No parents would ever think of allowing their children to play in the same place where adults are gambling, and often also cheating. But this is exactly the environment of the sports federations where sports activities of adults and children are all too often in close contact,” Donati said and asked:

“Why should children’s enthusiasm and their energies be manipulated through a compulsory, early specialisation which has misleading effects, instead of offering them all the values and rich variety of stimuli of sports activities aimed at self-fulfilment?”

Independent youth sport

His radical proposal is for each country to set up a Confederation for youth sports independent from the national Olympic Committee and the national sports federations.

The new confederation should establish educational sports projects for children and preadolescents from 4-12 years old based on a multilateral approach and offering different sports. The confederation should also train coaches and other trainers to handle an educational approach to sport and train executives and officials in better ways of managing the competitive aspect of sport.

Short of that, Donati encouraged countries and sports federations to consider changes in the education of coaches and executives involved in youth sports.

“Training of youth sports executives should not only be done by educators from the sports milieu but also by educators from schools, the medical profession, psychology and sociology in order to provide educational objectives with a wider scope than the mere development of sports performances,” Donati said. He also wanted federations to establish other goals for youth sports than results, and encouraged them to allocate enough money to pursue educational objectives which, may cut down the drop-out rate and prevent excessive specialisation.

Youth Olympics not an answer

With his proposal, Donati shot down a suggestion from IOC president Jacques Rogge who wants to solve the problem of an increasingly sedentary lifestyle and the diffusion of obesity among the younger people with the institution of Youth Olympics.

“Jacques Rogge probably does not even know that sedentariness among young people and the consequent development of metabolism disorders, are also a consequence of the high drop-out rate among young practitioners. They are estranged by an environment where selection and marginalisation are the rule and where the judgement of a young person’s achievements are reduced to a mere evaluation of sports results,” Donati concluded.

“Take the children away from the Olympic movement

The Italian doping-fighter, Sandro Donati, suggests that all countries set up a Confederation for youth sports in order to separate children and youngsters from the Olympic sports movement.

“This organisation, this conference is so bloody important, so many people in this room that comes from various countries, various different newsrooms, and various different organizations where they are essentially alone. They are alienated, they have no backup. What Play the Game provides us with is a community of likeminded people. Your organization is extraordinarily important”.

Declan Hill, Canadian Journalist and PhD student, UK.